

Gordon Solie ERA Quietly Ends



he first July episode of *WCW Pro Wrestling* was plodding along on TBS SuperStation. Suddenly, shortly after a series of inane moves during a Dave Sullivan match, Gordon Solie proclaimed, "And they wonder why I'm leaving?" Such was the only clue to a national audience of about 960,000 homes that this would be Solie's final bout on the channel where he became a national figure in the mid-1970s.

With the rare exception of vacation periods, Gordon Solie has been seen virtually every week on television somewhere calling wrestling since 1958. He deserved far better than the quiet fade to black which apparently ended his TBS mike career July 1.

THIS IS THE FIRST OF A TWO-ISSUE
RETROSPECTIVE ON GORDON Solie's
CAREER, including his TBS departure

MATWATCH '95

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Section*

BEVERLY

One week, Gordon Solie calls his final match for World Championship Wrestling. Five days later, Ric Flair's tenure as booker for WCW is ended for perhaps the final time.

A lot has been said on hotlines and written on computer on line services and in newsletters speculating on the reasoning for moving Flair out and Kevin Sullivan into the booking chair. But underlying much of it is television and WCW's recent poor performance, if one is to believe any insiders.

True, Flair has been in constant conflict with WCW chief Eric Bischoff and the Hulk Hogan/Randy Savage camp almost from the point of Hogan's assumption of the WCW world belt a year ago. Ultimately, the people who have seen Flair operate during Ted Turner's ownership of the company knew a showdown would occur to end the 12-time champion's power base. At some point, Flair had to step aside. But while the choice of Sullivan has shocked many behind the scenes, I, for one am not surprised.

The recent six-week nosedive in WCW ratings during a summer period which is usually friendlier to the group, particularly during the season of one-hour

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Solie is maintaining a dignified professionalism about the circumstances which led to his leaving WCW. He will not publicly discuss reasons behind his departure from the place where he has called bouts for 18 of the last 22 years. But in a phone conversation last week, Solie told me: "I'm 66-and-a-half years old. There comes a time when there are some things you don't want to take any more....and at my age, I think I can make the decision not to take them."

Contrary to early reports, Gordon is not totally retiring, though his will not be as visible on U.S. screens. He's taped seven episodes of *Ring Warriors*, a made-for-TV mat show closely aligned with New Japan. The series airs on Eurosport, a major overseas version of ESPN. Teamed with former sidekick Oliver Humperdink, Solie expects to do more.

"It was so pleasant and refreshing," said Solie. "They had coffee and bagels and a very relaxed setting for us. The matches were 12-to-19 minutes, long for today's American television. But you had enough time to build a storyline and develop the match."

Born Jonard Sjoblom in 1929 in Minnesota, Gordon Solie began his affiliation with pro wrestling in 1950 in the office of Cowboy Luttrall's Championship Wrestling from Florida, eight years before arguably the best-known of the old state NWA territorial shows made its television debut. Gordon and I reviewed the highlights and lowlights of his storied career.

The Early Years

When Gordon Solie began working for Luttrall 45 years ago, he was a jack-of-all-trades in the Florida office. The operation had not reached the sophistication it later would with the television series. But Solie would be ring announcer in some Florida cities, handle office details and assist with promotion. Occasionally, the bouts in Tampa would air on local radio. But the Florida TV markets would see wrestling on at least three of the four national networks at the time, most prominently the Dennis James-hosted broadcasts on DuMont.

In his autobiography, *Master of the Ring*, Gordon recalled how James, also a popular game show host of the era, did not endear himself to the wrestlers. "They didn't really like him," Solie said. "He tended to make

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Gordon (Continued from Page 1)

fun of what they did, breaking chicken bones to simulate the sound of a bone breaking, things like that."

Most of the network announcers, such as Bill Cullen, Jack Brickhouse, Bill Nimmo, James and Steve Allen went onto much larger successes in sports or entertainment. When wrestling left the networks in 1955, the locals picked up the slack. Enter 1958 at the Tampa Sportatorium and the debut of *Championship Wrestling from Florida*.

Gordon became the prime identity of CWF but was not its first host. "Actually, a guy named Bob Jones was the first host. I was there to do color and the live commercials," said Solie. "Somehow, Jones managed to insult Cowboy Luttrall. I never did understand what happened there, so Bob wound up off the show."

Jones was supplanted on the Florida show by Saul Fleischmann. "I actually owe a lot of my career to two Sauls," Gordon told me. "Saul Fleischmann hadn't been doing the show too long and one day, the Von Brauners were doing something dastardly—they may have brought a chair or a pipe into the ring, or something—and Saul just had a panic attack. He completely lost track of what was going on—and himself—and I thought he may have needed medical attention. This was in 1960 and when the show was over, he looked over at me and said, 'I just can't do this any more.' So, the next week, Cowboy put me in the host's chair."

Steve Beverly

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shows which traditionally do better than the fall and winter two-hour offerings, has served as a convenient copout to make Flair a scapegoat. Never in the history of WCW have its three cable shows failed to score a 2 rating for a stretch this long. While Flair is neither a great nor a poor booker, some of the recent bouts, angles and vignettes on the flagship Saturday night show would not have come out of Flair's mind on the ex-champ's worst day.

Does anyone of average intelligence actually believe Flair would have booked a three-bout show for July 1, which would have been top-lined by Johnny B. Badd vs. Diamond Dallas Page only two weeks before a pay-per-view? Would Flair have scheduled that awful Page-Dave Sullivan sketch with the phony kung fu movie sound effects? Hardly.

The failure of the Flair-Randy Savage series and TV angles to catch pay-per-view or ratings fire may have

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In those years, wrestling was a seasonal business in Florida. The promotion would shut down during summers. Solie would switch over to the Aut Swenson Auto Thrill Show which toured Florida. He would announce the events to the live grandstands. Occasionally, one would be filmed for local and regional television.

At 31, Solie was about to embark upon a decade which would place him and popular Atlanta announcer Ed Capral at the peak of their profession. Capral would occasionally trek down to Tampa to substitute during Gordon's vacations.

But two years after Solie assumed the host's seat, he was unceremoniously replaced. "Channel 13 (WTVT) in Tampa was our flagship station then and everything seemed to be going well," Gordon remembered. "One day, the Von Brauners went out of control again. A retired federal judge from Tampa happened to be watching the show that day. This guy wrote to the FCC and made all sorts of insinuations, including the possibility of challenging the station's license."

"The FCC made an inquiry and Channel 13's management became very nervous. They called a big meeting and said they didn't believe Cowboy or I could maintain control of the program. So, channel 13 inserted its sports director Russ Benedict as host of the program."

Benedict floated around several Florida markets, including Jacksonville and Panama City, for years as a sportscaster and was considered (in the early 1970s) one of Florida's first "happy talk" sports personalities. His "that's the three-oh mark in sports" signoff was the counterpart to Solie's "so long from the Sunshine State."

Gordon remained as Benedict's color commentator but the demotion would not last long. "I was told I was being moved over to speak only when spoken to," he said. "That's exactly what they told me because I was accused of letting the show get out of control. That's where the other Saul came in. After that incident, the Von Brauners went away for about six weeks and came back. Their manager was Gentleman Saul Weingeroff. Saul and the Von Brauners came out and Benedict asks, 'Gentleman Saul, where have you been?' Weingeroff just exploded. He said, 'Benedict, I thought you were a sportscaster. I thought you were a guy who did your homework and prepared for your interviews. I guess I was wrong because if you did, you'd know where I've been!' Russ didn't care if it was a work. He thought he'd been professionally embarrassed and he blew up. He took umbrage at Saul and almost walked right off the set. He said that was his last one and it was."

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Gordon

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This time, Gordon would not have to move over for federal judges, the FCC or station managements for the next 25 years. In fact, *Championship Wrestling from Florida* would become such a ratings powerhouse, major network affiliates would begin to jockey for the right to carry the show. Jacksonville was a class example. In 1963, the show moved from WJXT to NBC affiliate WFGA-TV. Solie and company carried WFGA to a 53 per cent share of audience and wrecked much of WJXT's Saturday afternoon sports and music lineup.

Likewise, the Florida show would become a favorite for promoters across the nation to import as a "B" show in their markets. By the end of the sixties, Solie would be seen weekly in nearly 80 cities. Eight years ago, Gordon explained the evolution: "You'd have a situation where Vince McMahon Sr. would call us and say, 'We can get an hour on another station in New York. Can we get your show?' So, we'd send the tapes up there, he'd insert his own promotional spots and eventually, Eddie Graham, Sam Steamboat and a lot of our guys would rotate going up and appearing on the Madison Square Garden cards once a month. That continued right on through the time *Dusty* (Rhodes) became so popular."

GRAHAM & MALENKO

Those early Florida years would find Gordon calling the exploits of the Assassins, the Torres Brothers, Haystacks Calhoun, Bob Orton Sr., Rip Hawk and Swede Hanson, Sam Steamboat, the Missouri Mauler (Larry Hamilton) and the Zebra Kid.

But Solie's career as a semi-national figure was cemented as he painted the weekly tensions between Eddie Graham and the Great Malenko (Larry Simon) as vividly as a Picasso in an elite gallery.

Malenko would tease the audience with just enough of an impression that he may one day turn his physical wrath to Solie. As the quintessential symbol of the Cold War, Malenko served to make Eddie Graham into the supreme, if older, babyface.

Arguably the peak of the Graham-Malenko wars came in 1967 during a TV bout which would rival some of today's ECW efforts in gore. In 1987, Gordon recollected the Malenko-Sam Steamboat match: "This one was to go about 17 minutes. Late in the match, Malenko began biting Sam's ear to the point if you were watching at home, you may have believed he was going to bite it off. It was a bloody mess. At the appropriate moment, Eddie ran in and knocked Malenko's dentures out of his mouth. He stomped them into the mat, over and over." The Sportatorium crowd exploded for Eddie but the angle led to Eddie's "suspension" for three months because of his "refusal" to pay for the dentures.

FAVORITE PHRASES OF GORDON SOLIE

"His face is a crimson mask." (For any wrestler in a bloodbath)

"Berrrrrrrrrr-ther!" (Usually for a powerful punch or high-flying move)

"IN-deed!" (A frequent retort to an arrogant heel comment)

"Well, look who's here!" (Sarcastic introduction to heels following the Florida show's final bout in the '60s, usually to the Medics or the Infernos)

"A high, HIGH vertical suplex." (Gordon was perhaps the only announcer in America to offer the French pronunciation of su-PLAY).

"A sultan of sartorial splendor." (The depiction of heel managers dressed in tuxedos)

"So long from the Sunshine State." (His classic goodbye tag line, later "so long from the great Peach State of Georgia" on TBS)

I told Gordon then of my late aunt, Maude Pugh, who would become so infuriated at Malenko, she would have to take a nerve pill after every Saturday afternoon session. Aunt Maude would regularly write Solie about Malenko, particularly after a confrontation between Larry and Beautiful Brutus (Mike Davis a/k/a Buggy McGraw) in the late '60s. She erupted one weekend when Gordon thanked Mrs. Maude PUG for her letter, rather than PEW. "He's gonna hear from me again about that," Aunt Maude insisted. She again wrote. No correspondent could have been as frequent with Gordon, other than the Abrams of Jacksonville, a couple whom through the sixties Solie would acknowledge "their weekly letter."

Gordon's weekly jousts with Malenko were a testament of how a terrorist could be built slowly to have staying power over a period of years, unlike the hot-shot style of the '80s and '90s.

Ironically, one of Gordon's few absences from the Florida show came in June 1971, the day of the famous Malenko babyface turn. Capral and Jim Crockett Sr. were subbing for the vacationing Solie and Don Curtis when a film clip from the previous Tuesday night in Tampa

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The Solie TV Timeline

1958 - Color analyst and commercial spokesman, *Championship Wrestling from Florida*.

1960-62, 1962-87 - Host, *Championship Wrestling from Florida*.

1969 - Filmed description of Dory Funk Jr.'s Tampa NWA world title victory over Gene Kiniski is nationally distributed.

1973 - Replaces short-lived Sterling Brewer as host of *Georgia Championship Wrestling* on Atlanta's WTGG.

1977 - The Georgia show becomes the first satellite-distributed wrestling show in U.S. TV history.

1981 - Dramatic angle in which heel analyst Roddy Piper "saves" Solie from an oncoming physical attack by Don Muraco. The sequence cements Piper as a rising major star.

1983 - Teams with Bob Caudle for *Starrcade*, wrestling's first closed-circuit supercard of the 1980s.

1984 - Black Saturday (July 14). Solie and the NWA renamed *World Championship Wrestling* are unceremoniously bumped from WTBS for a Vince McMahon version of the show.

1984 - July 28. Solie returns to WTBS for nine months in a one-hour show scheduled in weak morning time slots.

1985 - Jim Crockett returns NWA wrestling to SuperStation after a Turner-McMahon dispute but Crockett dumps Solie after the two fail to reach a money agreement.

1985-89 - Solie hosts assorted indie and territorial shows and (1986-87) the syndicated *Pro Wrestling This Week*. The 1987 angle where Solie is "fired" from PWTW by Paul E. Dangerously is considered a classic.

1987 - Crockett, after taking over the Florida promotion, cans Solie from the CWF series after a 29-year association, again in a money dispute.

1989 - Solie rehired by TBS shortly after Turner's purchase of Crockett Promotions. Off and on for the next six years, Solie would host a variety of WCW programs and join Jim Ross for a year as analyst on *Clash of the Champions*.

1990 - After a six-year absence, Solie hosts a May edition of *World Championship Wrestling* when Ross is in Washington for *Capitol Combat*.

1995 - Solie hosts his final WCW *Pro Wrestling* with no fanfare or goodbye, per order of WCW chief Eric Bischoff.

Gordon

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in which Malenko caused compadres Dick Murdoch and Rene Goulet to lose a tag bout.

Late in the show, Capral and Crockett were describing what appeared to be a routine six-man tag match with the Malenko/Murdoch/Goulet trio against three mid-card wrestlers. Murdoch and Goulet walked out, leaving Malenko to a pummeling.

The next week, Malenko was enraged at Solie for not being present to personally see his disaster. Malenko shocked the TV audience by demanding the services of his bitter enemy, Graham. In classic Solie style, Gordon pleaded with Graham in an understated fashion not to become intertwined with Malenko. A series of Malenko-Graham vs. Murdoch-Goulet bouts resulted in sellouts all over Florida for a month.

Solie would preside over several other celebrated Florida turns, including Sputnik Monroe (which fizzled), Hiro Matsuda (mediocre) and Dusty Rhodes (unquestionably the most successful in Florida history). But none would generate the intensity of reaction as did Malenko.

Jack Brisco

When you ask Gordon Solie to describe the textbook building of a new mat superstar, Jack Brisco is the name Gordon instantly produces.

"Brisco was basically a kid who nobody had heard of outside of the midwest," Gordon said last week. "But he became a sort of every-mother's-son. We took him and put him in so many dire situations that there wasn't a way in the world he was going to be able to get out of. Somehow, he'd manage to just barely eke his way out. The guy had to have a basic appeal but he became a star because people wanted to see whether Jack would overcome the latest heel."

From 1968 to 1973, Brisco owned Florida, first as the Southern champion, then from 1970-73 as Florida champion. In 1970, Gordon presided over the launch of a Brisco quest for Dory Funk Jr.'s NWA belt which frustrated Southeastern fans as much as '90s hardcores were irritated by the failure of Ric Flair to gain a win over Hulk Hogan.

Solie made the jaunt to Jacksonville in May 1970 to introduce the first of countless Brisco-Funk 60-minute draws. But Brisco would not ascend to the top rank until the title had first passed from Funk to Harley Race for 43 days in the summer of 1973. Brisco's victory over Race in Houston for the NWA belt is one of only two unfilmed or untaped NWA world title changes in the U.S. since 1969.

Gordon speaks fondly of the era when he was portrayed as the father figure to Brisco, who was actually only 12 years younger than Solie. Today, he sees little of Brisco, a near-recluse since retiring from wrestling a decade ago. "Jack and (brother) Jerry invested in a chain of auto parts shops and other businesses," said Solie. "Jerry, of course, is still very

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Gordon

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active in the business (as a front office executive with the WWF). But I don't suppose I've seen Jack in two years." Brisco has rejected offers for hall of fame and nostalgia appearances.

THE '70s AND GEORGIA

As we wrote in a 1991-92 compilation of wrestling's TV yeras, had business taken a natural course, Ed Capral would have become the voice of *Georgia Championship Wrestling* into the superstition years of TBS. Capral, in fact, was instrumental in the moving of the Georgia show from ABC affiliate WQXI in Atlanta to Ted Turner's WTCG in 1972.

"Channel 11 had a new general manager who had the bright idea of moving wrestling to Monday nights (Tuesday mornings) at 12:30, after football," said Capral in 1989. "I had known Ted Turner in the advertising business in Atlanta and when he bought channel 17, he asked me repeatedly about wrestling coming over. When we were dumped on Monday nights, we came over with Ted."

Within a month, wrestling became the most popular offering on WTCG, eventually the first program ever to be seen in 100,000 homes on Turner's independent. But the death of Atlanta promotion owner Ray Gunkel in the summer of 1972 would change the fortunes of TV wrestling in Atlanta, Capral and Solie. A dispute between Gunkel's widow, Ann, and long-time Atlanta promoter Paul Jones led to a legendary split between the two parties—and a bitter two-year fight over television time on the slowly-expanding WTCG. Ed Capral would make a crucial decision.

"I was very close to both Paul and Ann," said Capral. "But I felt a special bond to Ann because of what happened with Ray. I couldn't turn my back on her. So, I stayed with Ann's new *All-South Wrestling* show. That's how Gordon Solie wound up with Paul Jones and Ted Turner."

Not totally. The week immediately after the December 1972 split, Ann Gunkel was awarded a 7 p.m. Saturday slot on WTCG. Jones retained the 6 p.m. hour but all of Jones' wrestlers but Roberto Soto and Bob Armstrong departed for the Gunkel group.

Quickly, Jones called for help from the Florida promotion. The first Saturday in December, Jack Brisco vs. Robert Fuller and Eddie Graham vs. Don Curtis headed a hastily-produced edition of *Georgia Championship Wrestling*—without Gordon Solie. Veteran Birmingham mat announcer and commercial pitchman Sterling Brewer was recruited to fill Capral's NWA seat. But Brewer's bland delivery led to a barrage of complaints about Capral's absence. Brewer only lasted five weeks before a call was placed to Solie.

The first week in January 1973, Gordon was paired with newly-recruited Georgia booker Bill Watts. For the next 11 years, Saturdays at 6 on WTCG/WTBS would belong to Solie.

"They were still going Friday nights at the old City Auditorium in Atlanta," Gordon told me in 1987. "I'd either fly in the night before or on the Delta early bird Saturday mornings. We'd tape from ten to noon for that night and I'd be back home in Tampa in the evening (by then, the Florida show had switched to a Wednesday afternoon taping schedule)." That is until the mid-1970s when Gordon would fly

from Atlanta to Dothan, Ala, where he would do the live *Southeastern Championship Wrestling* on WTVY at 5:30 Central time. Cable viewers in the Dothan/Gulf Coast area would see Solie compete against himself in the early evening. "That got extremely interesting making those plane connections," Solie said. "One week, a flight was delayed out of Atlanta and I literally walked into the studio in Dothan 30 seconds before the show started live. Someone handed me a rundown and I was winging it as I never had before."

Steve Beverly

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been, in large part, a Flair responsibility. The hopelessly weak producing of WCW's *Worldwide* shows from Disney has been definitely on Flair's watch.

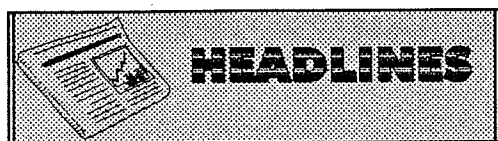
However, most of the significant talent decisions and the direction WCW's hierarchy has charted toward a kid-oriented production have been out of Flair's hands. One's memory should not be too short to forget the last time WCW programs scored a 4 rating were with Ric Flair in the booking chair.

Though I am not and never have been the in-awe fan of Flair as most hardcores and agree he has stayed in the forefront a shade too long, Flair has simply become a victim of the changing philosophies of an organization which has rarely stayed with a singular direction. Further, he has become the latest castoff of a wannabe TBS or Disney executive who apparently can do no wrong in the eyes of Turner officials, despite the recent lowest ratings in the history of WCW and the failure to establish one single new star in more than two years at the helm.

So what does Kevin Sullivan mean? Our editorial in the last issue probably says it all, though as far as total creative direction, expect very little to change. Sullivan has been regarded as a "smart guy," but never has he been in creative control of a smaller group that he hasn't attempted to go heavily into the "tree-of-woe" Satanic cult strategy. He will probably insult our intelligence with more of that.

However, overall, Sullivan is in this job primarily because he is one of the master politicians in the wrestling industry. That and that alone is why he continues to resurface at the age of 46 in push levels way beyond what his drawing power merits. Sullivan said the right things to enough of the right people to bounce Flair, who jealously held onto whatever traditions of WCW's NWA roots he could against the Hogan camp. Sullivan will do whatever Hogan and Jimmy

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WCW Extends Ratings Slump

DUNEDIN, FL. - *Monday Night Raw* continues its overwhelming dominance and WCW its unprecedented slump, according to Nielsen ratings for the first three weeks in July.

Through the weekend ending July 17, WCW had failed to score as high as a 2 rating with any of its three cable shows for eight consecutive weeks.

Ratings for the first three weeks in July:

Week Ending July 3	Rtg/Shr	Year Ago
Monday Night Raw	3.5/5.8	2.4/4.9
WCW Saturday Night	1.9/5.0	1.8/5.0
WWF Action Zone	1.8/5.4	1.8/6.2
WCW Main Event	1.7/3.9	1.4/3.8
WCW Pro Wrestling	1.5/6.6	1.3/5.2
WWF Mania	1.5/5.1	1.1/3.7

Week Ending July 10

Monday Night Raw	3.5/5.8	3.0/5.0
WCW Saturday Night	1.8/4.8	2.5/6.3
WCW Main Event	1.7/4.0	1.8/4.3
WWF Action Zone	1.6/4.9	1.9/5.8
WCW Pro Wrestling	1.1/4.5	1.3/5.7
WWF Mania	0.9/3.2	1.1/3.9

Week Ending July 17

Monday Night Raw	3.1/5.1	3.1/5.0
WCW Saturday Night	1.9/5.1	2.1/5.8
WWF Action Zone	1.8/5.3	2.0/6.0
WCW Main Event	1.8/4.2	1.8/4.1
WWF Mania	1.5/5.0	1.3/4.4
WCW Pro Wrestling	1.3/4.7	0.8/2.9

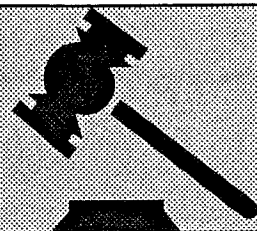
BUY-RATES STRONG FOR UFC VI

NEW YORK—Early returns on buy-rates for the Ultimate Fighting Championship VI look strong but WCW's *Bash at the Beach* appears to have fallen below last year's levels.

Leading cable operators estimate with replay showings, UFC VI will finish with a 1.4 per cent buy-rate in approximately 300,000 homes (\$6 million gross revenues).

Concurrently, early returns on WCW's California pay-cable show list the event between an 0.8 and 0.9 (195,000 buys, \$5.8 million), slightly higher than pre-show forecasts but below last year's 1.1 for the Hulk Hogan-Ric Flair title confrontation. WCW is publicly claiming "over a 1" for the show.

MATWATCH '95 EDITORIALS



GORDON DESERVED BETTER

This issue and next, *Matwatch '95* recounts magic moments of the most storied career in professional mat broadcasting. No matter if you grew up with Gordon Solie or are part of the last-decade generation of wrestling who couldn't appreciate Gordon's talents, what Solie did for 35 years paved the way with the finest vocal asphalt for those few who practice the trade today.

In again allowing his ego to supersede decency and tradition, WCW chief Eric Bischoff epitomizes the lack of respect veteran broadcasters have had from the Turner organization since 1988.

Most viewers never had a chance to savor the charismatic quality of Lance Russell because WCW never tailored a format to match the special talents Lance demonstrated in a Memphis studio for years. Jim Ross was politicked out of WCW by Bischoff, Jesse Ventura and Tony Schiavone and TBS ratings have never been the same.

Gordon Solie's talents were chipped away at by hardcore fans and insiders who failed to respect what Gordon had contributed to the industry for nearly four decades. But, as Russell aptly pointed out shortly before Gordon's departure from WCW, "When the material is in front of him, Gordon can still call a heckuva match." Lance should know. He and Gordon did pay-per-view shows live on WCW's hotline together in the early '90s.

To have allowed Gordon to depart WCW without as little as a simple thank you and goodbye to those who have followed him on TBS since 1973 was more than a slap in the face. It was an insult for which Bischoff will be eventually repaid in spades when his time comes—and it will come. Gordon Solie's work made millions for the SuperStation when it was becoming a national cable service in the 1970s and '80s. He deserves far better than a simple fadeaway from Saturday mornings. Sleep well, Mr. Bischoff.

PINOCCHIO'S NOSE

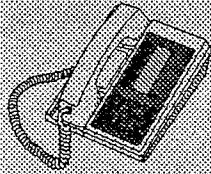
Pro wrestling is indeed a work of fiction. Nothing has any more proved such than on WCW's recap of *Bash at the Beach* the weekend of July 22-23.

Bad enough was Tony Schiavone's, Bobby Heenan's and Hulk Hogan's insistence of "hundreds of thousands" of fans in attendance at the live Huntingdon Beach, Ca., show. But the sin was ultimately compounded in the week after when voiceovers continued to include the figure of 100,000 fans gathering for the event.

Police estimates were no higher than 9,500 and all but a fifth-grader could have plainly seen the sparsity of the crowd from the helicopter shots during the show itself.

Ultimately embarrassing is this continues to compound the credibility of World Championship Wrestling. The list includes the Gene Okerlund debacle over Jerry Blackwell's death on the WCW hotline, question marks concerning the accuracy of 900 number voting for matches on its "live interactive" shows (a practice quietly stopped), Bischoff's outrageous claims about Craig Pittman's performance in Ultimate Fight-style events and now crowd estimates which not only smack of desperation but insult viewer intelligence.

Except for the fiction of the ring itself, WCW should be held to a standard of accuracy on all of its claims; otherwise, the Federal Trade Commission ought to pay the company a visit. Credibility is a standard a person with the professional reputation of WCW president Harvey Schiller should value—and demand, wrestling or not.



The Wrestling Observer Hotline

COMING IN AUGUST

August 6

CLASH ANALYSIS
Option 3
30 Min. After Clash

August 18

FRIDAY NIGHT LIVE
with Dave Meltzer

August 28

SUMMER SLAM LIVE
Option 3
11 P.M. EDT

1-900-903-9900

99 CENTS PER MINUTE

Hotline Adds Friday Live Seg

JACKSON, Tn.—Barring technical software delays, The Wrestling Observer Hotline will premiere a new *Friday Night Live* segment beginning Aug. 18.

Hotline co-owners Dave Meltzer and Steve Beverly will alternate on an every-other-Friday basis taking live calls on the service's Option 3 during a prime time hour to be determined within the next week.

Meltzer will host both the inaugural Aug. 18 and Sept. 1 segments. Beverly will take calls Sept. 15. Later in the year, other WOH correspondents will be featured on the Friday programs.

The live interactive feature will also be added to post-game wrapups of pay-per-view shows, beginning with the Aug. 28 *Summer Slam Live* segment at 11 p.m. (EDT). Meltzer and Beverly will field calls in separate half-hour blocks.

Gordon

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In those first six months in Atlanta, the talent base was still being sorted but Tim Woods, who had campaigned the previous two years in Florida, was borrowed to reassume the identity of Mr. Wrestling which propelled him to stardom in Georgia in the mid-sixties. Years later, Solie would admit to a credibility problem with south Georgia viewers who received both the Georgia and Florida shows on cable. Woods had already unmasked in Florida a year earlier. Further Solie would refer to Brisco in Florida as "the number one contender in the United States for the world title" while doing likewise for Woods in Georgia. "We didn't really consider about 100,000 viewers just above the Florida line and we should have," Gordon told me. But those issues proved minimal. The Atlanta show grew to such audience proportions, Ted Turner would replay the Saturday edition in prime time until 1977 on Wednesday nights with surprisingly strong ratings.

But with Woods' limited availability across the Georgia circuit, Watts made a decision to create a spinoff character, Mr. Wrestling II, with balding, over-40 Johnny Walker selected to carry the ball during Woods' absences. The II persona was more aggressive and after a heated feud with Watts, propelled to the biggest star in Georgia history and, arguably, the biggest star ever in the old Georgia territory. "Walker had wrestled with Woods in a tag match in Florida where Tim pinned Dory Jr.," Gordon would say in Atlanta many years later. "He had never been a major star as Johnny Walker but the mask made him a career."

In November 1974, the two-year battle with Gunkel would end as Georgia Championship Wrestling owner Jim Barnett would buy out the rival group. Capral was silenced for the first time in 20 years as an Atlanta mat announcer and would spend 1975-77 as the voice of Jim Crockett Jr.'s *Wide World Wrestling* before retiring. The buyout would result in an expansion of the Solie show to two hours.

Over the next ten years, Solie would play host on WTCG/WTBS to the Briscos, the Funks, Bob Backlund, Andre the Giant, Stan Hansen, Bobby Shane, Ole and Gene Anderson, Nick Bockwinkel and Bobby Heenan (who were parties to the only angle where Solie was ever physically decked), Harley Race, Paul Orndorff and Jimmy Snuka, Ivan Koloff, Bob Armstrong, Tully Blanchard, Ric Flair—and a little-known competitor dubbed Sterling Golden, nearly a decade before he would revolutionize wrestling as Hulk Hogan.

By 1977, the SuperStation era was born with WTCG's delivery to a national audience via satellite. Solie was the constant among the revolving door of wrestlers in Georgia and with *Georgia Championship Wrestling* the highest-rated program of any kind on cable over the next seven years, Gordon became arguably the first made-for-cable star.

Solie's influence over the industry grew with the SuperStation's cable stature. "The decision was made to move permanently to the Omni in Atlanta and to run Sunday nights rather than Fridays," Solie said in 1987. "So,

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Gordon (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7)

we became even more important in Atlanta as the show to promote the big weekend card, rather than what was a full week ahead. Every promoter and, for that fact, every wrestler would try to get booked for the Sunday night show in order to get the national exposure on Saturday."

Steve Beverly

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5)

Hart wants. The only serious question mark is how far he will push this Dungeon of Doom scenario which probably was the focus of the most embarrassing segment the weekend of July 22 on WCW television since that infamous attempted murder mini-movie in 1993.

At deadline, early reports had the WCW *Bash-at-the-Beach* scoring a buy-rate which will at least make the show marginally profitable, despite perhaps the worst creativity on a Turner show in ages. The ridiculous sidebar to this is the WCW people were congratulating themselves royalty in California, according to insiders, for a tremendous job of production. From this corner, not to mention the insulting lie about the crowds from Hogan, Tony Schiavone and Bobby Heenan, the first four finishes were virtually the same, only the side of the ring was changed; the triangular tag bout ended in enough confusion to make the old Dusty finish look credible; and for an organization trying to build Flair as still the major performer for WCW's Aug. 4 taped pay-per-view, all credibility he has was virtually eroded in his loss to Randy Savage and in the incredulous angle where he ran like a whipped pup from Big Van Vader.

Perhaps Dave Meltzer's comments on The Wrestling Observer Hotline less than a half-hour after the bout were the most telling. Said Dave: "Even with Bill Watts, and I was very critical of what Bill Watts did with WCW, you had a guy who did know wrestling at one time and the business just passed him by. With the group in charge of WCW now, about the only thing you can say is the business never got to them."

My prediction: I don't at all believe the backroom maneuverings are yet over. Sullivan has no track record of turning around an organization and I don't see his strategy getting WCW any more than temporarily out of its severe TBS ratings doldrums. In four to six months, he can easily be another sacrificial lamb. Best bet: watch for an even bigger shakeup on the 12th floor of CNN Center...and a name from the past involved.

The changes would lead to a "guest star of the week" television format which worked handsomely in the ratings until the inevitable Vince McMahon revolution in the mid-1980s.

The top rating for a weekly WCW show during the Solie era (when the SuperStation was only seen in 22 million homes) came in February

1983 when Wrestling II risked his mask in an elimination tag bout. Teamed with Pez Whatley, the opponents were Larry Zbyszko—with whom II was embarked on his last major Georgia feud—and "guest star" Tully Blanchard. The event, which is still considered one of Solie's top TBS calls, saw II have to battle Zbyszko and Blanchard alone in the last eight minutes but manage to schoolboy Larry for the win after a restart. The rating: 6.8 with a 13 per cent share. More than 1.4 million homes watched Gordon Solie bring home another one.

(Next issue: the famous Roddy Piper angle, Black Saturday, Solie's four-year departure from TBS and his plans for life after the SuperStation.)

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